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ABSTRACT

The etiology of homosexuality is probably best explained from a multidimensional framework which takes into account socialization, family background, and individual developmental factors. A research review was conducted to examine the influence of parental characteristics in the etiology of homosexuality. The findings of the review support the contention that parental characteristics are related to the development of a homosexual orientation in both males and females. While causality has not been demonstrated, the incidence of negative parental factors in the backgrounds of homosexuals as compared to heterosexuals clearly suggests that the relationship of these factors to the development of homosexuality cannot be overlooked. These negative parental characteristics may influence the development of homosexuality due to their impact on gender identity formation in the child. Compared to heterosexuals, homosexual men were found to be more likely to recall domineering mothers who discouraged their masculine development. Compared to heterosexual women, homosexual women tended to report rejecting, less influential mothers. Homosexuals of both sexes reported absent, weak, and/or nonaffectionate fathers. (NB)

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EARLY FAMILY INFLUENCES IN THE ETIOLOGY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

A Doctoral Research Paper

Presented to

the Faculty of the Rosemead School of Psychology

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In Partial Fullfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

by

Stephanie Anne Neill

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EARLY FAMILY INFLUENCES

IN THE ETIOLOGY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

EARLY FAMILY INFLUENCES

IN THE ETIOLOGY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Stephanie Anne Neill

This evaluative review examines the impact of early family influences on the development of homosexuality. Family constellation, parental characteristics, and gender identity are addressed as variables that may influence the development of a homosexual orientation.

Compared to heterosexuals, homosexual men are more likely to recall domineering mothers who discourage their masculine development. Homosexual women tend to report rejecting, less influential mothers. Homosexuals of both sexes report absent, weak, nonaffectionate fathers.

It appears that the effect of these parental characteristics is due to their influence on gender identity. Parental characteristics affect gender identity which in turn affects the development of homosexuality.

Early Family Influences

in the Etiology of Homosexuality

The etiology of homosexuality is a topic of much debate. Many theories have been advanced to explain the occurrence of homosexuality, using concepts from the fields of biology, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry. No theory has as yet offered a complete explanation for the development of homosexuality. It is probably best explained from a multidimensional framework which takes into account socialization, family background, and individual developmental factors. While each of these areas is fruitful for study, the scope of this paper will be limited to the effect of parental characteristics on the development of homosexuality.

The trend recently has been to view homosexuality as an alternate lifestyle, rather than a result of pathological development or abnormal behavior (Smith, 1980). In the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III, American Psychiatric Association, 1980), homosexuality itself is not considered a mental disorder. Only if the individual views his or her homosexuality as unwanted, undesirable, and a source of distress is the diagnosis of ego-dystonic homosexuality warranted. While this may reduce the possibility of labeling and ostracism, the development of

sexual orientation remains important for understanding broader issues about sexuality, with practical implications for the treatment and prevention of ego-dystonic homosexuality.

If homosexuality is in some cases caused by negative developmental or familial factors, these factors need to be considered carefully in order to understand their influence on the development of homosexual orientation. Although the clinical implications of this review apply primarily to ego-dystonic homosexuality, the review will consider the broader category of homosexual development in general, since the empirical literature relevant to etiology rarely distinguishes between the two types of homosexuality.

This paper reviews the literature investigating the influence of parental characteristics on the development of homosexual orientation. The review covers studies published during the last 20 years, as identified through a computer search and reference sections of appropriate articles. Research investigating the development of gender identity in homosexuals will also be considered, since the influence of parental characteristics on sexual orientation may operate via gender identity as an intervening variable. Only those articles found on gender identity that relate specifically to homosexual development are included. The review in this area is not exhaustive, but rather attempts to be representative of research on gender identity.

A brief overview of etiological theories, taken mainly from the reviews of Acosta (1975) and Marmor (1971), is followed by a consideration of methodological issues. A review of recent empirical literature concerning the influence of family factors and parental characteristics on the development of homosexuality is presented, with consideration given to their effects on gender identity.

Overview of Etiological Theories

Biological

Biological theories of etiology attempt to establish genetic, chromosomal or hormonal causes for homosexual development. Genetic factors have been investigated primarily through twin studies. These studies suffer from small, nonrepresentative samples and from experimenter bias due to sampling methods. Results have not provided any definite evidence for genetic causes of homosexuality. However, they may suggest factors that could predispose an individual to homosexuality given certain life experiences (Acosta, 1975).

Similarly, research on chromosomal and hormonal constitution has failed to provide conclusive evidence for the development of homosexuality in humans. While animal studies have provided some evidence for the influence of hormones on abnormal sexual functioning, these findings cannot be generalized to humans (Marmor, 1971). The

influence of hormones on sexual behavior "appears to diminish along the evolutionary scale" (Meyer-Bahlburg, 1977).

Social Learning

In contrast to biological theories, social learning theories postulate that homosexuality is a learned pattern of behavior. These theorists reject the psychoanalytic assumption that homosexual behavior arises from early conflict with parents (see next section). Social reinforcements and conditioning are important influences on how children learn to express their sexuality more toward one sex than the other. The development of sexual orientation and the adoption of appropriate sex-role behavior is also affected by observational learning and modeling. Researchers in this area provide empirical and clinical evidence indicating the failure of some boys and girls to learn appropriate sex-typed behaviors and preferences. This failure in learning plays an important function in the child's later preference for heterosexuality or homosexuality (Acosta, 1975).

Psychoanalytic

Psychoanalytic theorists attribute homosexuality to a failure to complete the identification process due to disturbed parent-child relationships. Failure to resolve the ambivalence of early feelings toward mother leads to the use of primitive defenses and also interferes with the

resolution of the Oedipal complex. A child who perceives his mother as frightening or dangerous may then renounce all women as too frightening to relate to. Thus for males, women become phobic objects.

Another psychoanalytic view that has been given less attention is that of the homosexual choosing a same-sex love-object as a narcissistic extension of himself. The love-object of the homosexual represents the homosexual himself or his idealized self (Marmor, 1971).

Family Background

Family theorists view homosexuality as an adaption to the environment provided by the family. Here family influences, especially parental characteristics, are the significant factors in the development of a homosexual orientation. The parental constellation most often found in the background of homosexuals is a seductive or dominant mother and a weak, passive, or absent father (Marmor, 1971). This pattern is similar to that noted by psychoanalytic writers.

Although the research in this area has yielded mixed results, it is an important area of study. Recently attention has focused on problems in the development of gender identity in the homosexual. This is an area where the family exerts considerable influence. It may be that the influence of familial characteristics on the development of homosexuality in the child is due to their effect on

gender identity.

There is considerable overlap among the etiological theories from the social learning, psychoanalytic and family background fields. Research from these three areas has focused on the influence of parents in the development of homosexuality in children. Often, research designs are similar and thus they suffer from the same methodological weaknesses. These methodological issues deserve careful consideration.

Methodological Issues

Four major methodological problems have emerged from the research on homosexual development. These problems are: 1) primary reliance on questionnaire and interview data, 2) the predominance of retrospective data rather than direct measurement, 3) the use of non-representative samples, and 4) the lack of control groups. As these issues are important to keep in mind when evaluating the research, a brief discussion of them is in order.

The majority of research studies in this area rely on the use of questionnaire or interview data. Such methods often use global questions and can be confounded with social desirability response biases. Questions regarding a specific area of development may not be included, especially if the researcher involved has any bias against the importance of that area. This is especially true when a

large sample is interviewed. Data obtained by questionnaires and interviews are also subject to other questions of validity, such as the tendency to give socially desirable answers. In the case of research with homosexuals, Van den Aardweg (1984) noted the possibility of a defensive response set among subjects "who do not want to admit their being abnormal" (p. 181).

A further consideration is the use of retrospective reports. Almost all studies in this area rely on recall data from adults about their early childhood experiences. This type of data is subject to problems of faulty recall and falsification (Larzelere & Klein, 1987). Early childhood experiences and attitudes may be difficult to reconstruct, especially if they concern an area which developed gradually. Childhood events viewed from an adult perspective may take on new meaning which can have an effect on the accuracy of the recollection. Falsification of data may occur due to perceived social desirability of responses. The objectivity of such data is questionable.

Another area of methodological concern is the use of non-representative samples. Most of the research has been done with male subjects and there is a paucity of information about female homosexuals. Further, although there is a trend away from this, the majority of studies in the past have used a clinical population. Many studies rely on data obtained from hospitalized individuals or those

seeking psychotherapy. Pro-gay researchers have particularly objected to this since it seems to perpetuate the illness model of homosexuality and omits those homosexuals who are seen as well-adjusted. It has also been noted that the majority of research with male and female homosexuals has included bisexuals as well as those who are more exclusively homosexual (Acosta, 1975).

Still another area of concern is the lack of control groups. Some researchers have reached conclusions about homosexual development with no comparison of subjects to heterosexual controls. This raises questions about the validity of such conclusions. Marmor (1965) noted that the same patterns often found in homosexual families "abound in the histories of countless heterosexual individuals also and cannot therefore be in themselves specific causative factors" (p. 5).

A final common methodological problem concerns the direction of causality. When common patterns are found in the family backgrounds of homosexuals, the temptation is to then attribute causality to the relevant family factors. However, caution must be used. It may be that certain characteristics of the child elicited negative parental behavior or attitudes rather than the parental characteristics causing homosexual development in the child. Even if a consistent pathological or negative pattern is found, this cannot be equated with causality.

Consideration of these methodological issues is important when evaluating the findings in the area of homosexual development. Some researchers have taken steps toward solving these problems by the more frequent use of control groups and a wider sampling of the homosexual population. However, data collection methods generally remain problematic. This issue will be addressed further in the discussion of research on parental characteristics.

Family Constellation of Homosexuals

Family size and birth order of homosexuals have been studied as indirect means of identifying etiological variables. These variables may be important due to their influence on the quality of the parent-child relationship. Data in this area are more objective and are not subject to most of the methodological criticisms cited above. The research in this area has included male and female samples from both clinical and non-clinical populations, yielding mixed results.

In a comparison of lesbians and nonlesbians, Gundlach and Reiss (1967) reported that significantly more lesbians were only children or firstborn of two siblings. However, in families of up to seven children, they were more likely to be fifth, sixth, or seventh born. Siegelman (1973) compared 49 birth order and family size variables and found no significant differences among lesbians and nonlesbians in

a nonclinical, noncriminal sample. Likewise, Hare and Moran (1979) found that the birth orders of hospitalized lesbians were no different from birth orders of the general population.

The reasons for the discrepancies in these findings is not completely clear. Family size is not reported by Hare and Moran (1979), although they state that their sample was restricted to sibships of less than ten. It is possible that the effects of early-born siblings in small families cancel the effects of later-born siblings in large families when these data are analyzed together. Gundlach and Reiss (1967) controlled for family size and did find significant differences in the birth order of homosexuals and heterosexuals.

The findings for male homosexuals' birth order are also mixed. Among hospitalized male homosexuals, Hare and Moran (1979) found that birth order was later and mean parental age was higher than that in the general population. These findings replicated those of Slater in an earlier study (Slater, 1962; cited in Hare & Moran, 1979). Bieber and Bieber (1979) also found in their sample that the son who becomes homosexual tends to be a younger family member. In his male sample, Siegelman (1973) found that homosexuals were more likely to have brothers that were older by five years or more, come from families with four or more siblings, and have two or more sisters. Fewer homosexuals

had only one sister, were from two-sibling families, or had only younger sisters. Siegelman states that "the 6 out of 49 significant differences for males gave little support to the notion that birth order or family size variables represented distinct or meaningful contrasts between male homosexuals and heterosexuals" (p. 164). Although the number of significant findings is not dramatically above what may be expected by chance, Siegelman's findings do agree with the research cited above.

While the findings are somewhat tentative, there is some evidence that homosexuals are more likely to come from larger families, be later born, and have older parents. What are the effects of this constellation on the development of homosexuality in the child? Several researchers have noted the isolation of the homosexual from siblings (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Thompson, Schwartz, McCandless, & Edwards, 1973; Van den Aardweg, 1984) and the research cited above would support the possibility of such isolation, especially for those individuals who are only children (Gundlach & Reiss, 1967) or are later born in large families with a large age gap between children (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Gundlach & Reiss, 1967; Hare & Moran, 1979; Siegelman, 1973). This constellation could easily lead to less interaction with siblings, especially in cases where the homosexual is separated from older siblings by five years or

more as was the case with one of Siegelman's findings (1973).

Parental Characteristics

Several of the methodological criticisms noted earlier have been attended to in some of the recent research on parental characteristics. Most studies of parental characteristics have utilized comparisons of homosexual reports with reports of matched heterosexual control groups. Experimental groups have been drawn from a wide range of homosexuals including those involved in psychotherapy (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Van den Aardweg, 1984), those in the military (Snortum, Marshall, Gillespie, & Mosberg, 1969), volunteers from homophile organizations (Evans, 1969; Ibrahim, 1973; Saghir & Robins, 1971; Thompson et al., 1973) and those from gay rights activist groups (Stephan, 1973). Unless otherwise stated, the studies cited below have relied on retrospective data and have used a matched heterosexual control group.

Mothers of Homosexuals

The research on mothers of homosexuals indicates that both males and females tended to view their mothers in a negative way. However, the significant characteristics noted are somewhat different for male and female homosexuals.

Males. The classic description of the mother of the

homosexual male is that of a domineering, overcontrolling type who is inappropriately intimate with her son. Does the research support this description?

Bieber and Bieber (1979) have identified what they term the "close-binding-intimate mother." They characterized this type of mother as one who was overly intimate with her son, often in a sexualized way, who tended to be overprotective, over-controlling and guilt-provoking, and who encouraged dependency in her son. Data for their study consisted of over 1000 psychiatric interviews with inpatient male homosexuals and interviews with 100 pairs of parents. They did not use a control group in their study, nor did Hatterer (1970) or Van den Aardweg (1984) who both found similar results in their clinical samples. However, these characteristics have also been noted consistently in the mothers of homosexuals from non-clinical samples who were compared with heterosexual control groups (Evans, 1969; Saghir & Robins, 1971; Snortum et al., 1969; Stephans, 1973). Most of these studies will be discussed further in the following sections.

The type of mother described by homosexuals inhibited the development of masculinity in her son which was not the case in mothers of heterosexuals (Thompson et al., 1973). She treated him as if he were unable to defend himself and elicited in him a self-image of being weak (Van den Aardweg, 1984).

Another characteristic noted in mothers of homosexual males was a puritanical, restrictive attitude towards sex. This attitude also appeared to inhibit masculine development by discouraging the son's interest in normal, heterosexual activities (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969).

It has also been noted that these mothers insisted on being the center of their son's attention significantly more than mothers of heterosexuals (Evans, 1969; Thompson et al., 1973). The son was chosen as the mother's confidant, often coming between her and her husband (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969). In families with more than one child, the homosexual son was clearly the mother's favorite (Bieber & Bieber, 1979).

Perhaps the most interesting research in this area is by Stephan (1973). In his study, mothers of homosexuals were perceived by their sons as more dominant and less likable than mothers of heterosexual controls. They made more of the family decisions and the homosexuals felt less respected by them. While these results were not unusual in themselves, what makes them striking is that the homosexuals studied were members of a gay activist organization and indicated a firm commitment to their sexual orientation. According to Stephan, "it is possible that a group of militant homosexuals would have a less negative retrospective bias toward their early social experiences and their parents than homosexuals who were less comfortable

about being openly committed to homosexuality" (p. 507). Yet, the results are similar to those cited above, portraying mothers of homosexuals as being dominant and controlling in the lives of their homosexual sons.

Conflicting findings concerning the importance of mother characteristics have also been reported. In a study of British homosexuals, Siegelman (1981a) stated that "the data reported raise serious questions about the existence of any association between parental background behavior and homosexuality vs. heterosexuality in males" (p. 511). Of the three types of group comparisons made (total samples, groups of homosexuals vs. heterosexuals equated on neuroticism, and groups of homosexuals vs. heterosexuals equated on femininity), the only consistent finding was that homosexuals' mothers were more demanding than heterosexuals' mothers. For subgroups equated low on femininity, this finding was not significant. However, the only maternal characteristics measured by Siegelman's questionnaire were protecting, rejecting, casual, demanding and loving. It is highly likely that such a general measure would miss the other specific mother characteristics noted in the research above.

Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith (1981) have also objected to the importance placed on parental characteristics in the development of homosexualtiy. They concluded that specific parental attitudes play practically

no role in the causation of homosexuality. However, the importance of mother characteristics may have been obscured in their study by the statistical methods chosen and a lack of specific questions relating to mother characteristics. These issues will be discussed further in following sections.

In sum, it appears that maternal characteristics do play an important role in the development of male homosexuality. The classic pattern of a domineering, overcontrolling mother is supported by the majority of the research.

Females. The research concerning female homosexuality is limited, especially in the area of parental characteristics. The available literature suggests that females also perceived their mothers in a negative way (Ibrahim, 1976; Loney, 1973).

In comparison with heterosexuals, female homosexuals did not feel accepted by their mothers (Poole, 1972; Thompson, 1973). They perceived their mothers as less influential, affectionate and understanding, and more unhappy (Poole, 1972). Only 14% of homosexual women in one study reported that they identified with their mothers. Although the authors do not report the percentage of heterosexuals who identified with their mothers, they note that the difference was significant (Saghir & Robins, 1971).

In a study with female subjects, replicating the one

cited above with males, Siegelman (1981b) concluded that the parental differences found among female subjects were not associated with the subjects' adjustment differences (on neuroticism), but with homosexual vs. heterosexual differences. Homosexuals in this study viewed their mothers as significantly more rejecting and less loving than the heterosexual controls.

Bell et al. (1981) again do not support these findings. They stated that although these factors may contribute to a homosexual orientation, their importance has been grossly exaggerated.

Although there are some variations in the data on mothers of homosexuals, the majority of the research indicates the presence of more negative personality characteristics in them than in the mothers of heterosexuals. For males, a pattern emerges of a restrictive, over-controlling, dominant mother who encourages dependency in her son, while at the same time discouraging masculinity. For female homosexuals, the pattern seems to be one of a rejecting mother who is also perceived as less influential and affectionate than the mothers of heterosexual women.

Fathers of Homosexuals

Along with the characteristics noted in mothers of homosexuals, the research indicates negative personality patterns in the fathers of homosexuals. The pattern here

appears to be more similar for males and females than that found in mothers of homosexuals.

Males. The most consistent paternal association of homosexuality in males is that fathers of homosexual sons were perceived as absent or detached. This was the case in clinical and non-clinical samples, and studies both with and without control groups (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969; Ibrahim, 1976; Saghir & Robins, 1971; Snortum, 1969; Stephan, 1973; Thompson et al., 1973; Van den Aardweg, 1984). Significantly more homosexuals than heterosexuals came from families where the father was physically absent through death or divorce. However, even in intact families, the fathers of homosexuals were psychologically absent (Saghir & Robins, 1971; Stephan, 1973).

Van den Aardweg (1984) noted that the most important father factor in 71% of his subjects was the father's detachedness and non-participation in the son's upbringing. This showed up clearly in a pattern of little affection and a lack of confidentiality between father and son. While no control group was used in this study and findings were based on a purely clinical sample, his findings agree with those of researchers using control groups and varied homosexual samples.

Hostility is another characteristic noted in homosexuals' fathers (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969; Snortum et al., 1969; Thompson et al., 1973; Van den

Aardweg, 1984). Often this took the form of competitiveness, but was also manifested in detachment and disinterest (Bieber & Bieber, 1979). Frequently, the homosexual son still had feelings of fear and hatred for his father after childhood (Bieber & Bieber, 1979). This finding was also more frequent in homosexuals than heterosexuals (Evans, 1969).

Another consistent finding was a feeling of rejection by the homosexual's father (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969; Hatterer, 1970; Stephan, 1973; Van den Aardweg, 1984). Homosexual subjects felt significantly less close to their fathers than heterosexuals (Siegelman, 1981a; Van den Aardweg, 1984) and perceived their relationship as negative (Ibrahim, 1976). They felt less respected by their fathers and also accepted and respected their fathers less than heterosexuals (Evans, 1969; Stephan, 1973). After seeing over 1000 subjects in psychiatric interviews, Bieber and Bieber (1979) asserted, "We have never interviewed a male homosexual whose father openly loved and respected him" (p. 411).

In addition, fathers of homosexuals were less likely to encourage masculine attitudes and activities than heterosexual fathers (Evans, 1969; Saghir & Robins, 1971; Stephan, 1973). Some of the fathers of homosexuals encouraged feminine attitudes (Evans, 1969). In a comparison with heterosexuals, Saghir and Robins (1971)

found that only 13% of the homosexuals had identified with their fathers. Another 83% had no parental figure to identify with or identified with their mothers. While they gave no percentages for heterosexuals, the authors noted that there was a significant difference.

Fathers of homosexuals discouraged their sons from imitating them (Thompson et al., 1973) and were seen as less dominant than fathers of heterosexuals (Evans, 1969). Also, they interfered with their son's heterosexual activities in adolescence more than heterosexual fathers did (Evans, 1969).

In Stephan's (1973) study of activist male homosexuals, subjects were asked to evaluate their fathers on ten variables: absent, encouraged masculine behavior and attitudes, rigid, fearful, insecure, affectionate, likable, dominant, deserving of respect, and giving of respect to the subject. In contrast to a heterosexual comparison group, the homosexual group did not rate their fathers favorably on any variable. The clearest item differentiating homosexuals from heterosexuals in another study was, "I never got along well with my father" (Snortum et al., 1969, p. 768). Fifty-seven percent of homosexual subjects endorsed this item, while only 7% of the heterosexual controls did. These findings clearly show the pivotal importance of these negative father characteristics to their homosexual sons.

The only conflicting findings found were those of Bell et al. (1981) discussed earlier.

Females. The father characteristics noted by female homosexuals are very similar to those found for males. Fathers tended to be absent or uninvolved in their daughters lives (Saghir & Robins, 1971). They were lacking in affection and understanding (Poole, 1972; Siegelman, 1981b). Lesbians had negative memories of their fathers (Loney, 1973) and tended to view them as weak and hostile (Thompson et al., 1973). In comparison to heterosexuals who felt strongly accepted by their fathers, homosexual females felt only moderately so (Thompson et al., 1973). Similarly, heterosexuals felt closer to their fathers and viewed them as more loving than homosexuals did (Siegelman, 1981b). Again, Bell et al. (1981) found much less evidence of distinctions among heterosexuals' vs. homosexuals' perceptions of their fathers.

As was the case with male homosexuals, lesbians' fathers were also more dissapproving of the subject of sex than the fathers of heterosexuals. Lesbians' fathers did not encourage heterosexual activity or interest in their daughters (Poole, 1972; Thompson et al., 1973).

In sum, the research on both fathers and mothers of homosexuals indicates the presence of negative characteristics that influence the child's sexual orientation. While the data on mother characteristics

indicate a different pattern for males and females, the characteristics of fathers appear to be the same for both males and females. Fathers of homosexuals were perceived in both cases as weak, absent, hostile, and lacking in affection. Mothers of homosexual males were seen as dominant, restrictive and over-controlling, while females viewed them as rejecting and lacking in love and affection. In all cases, there were more negative characteristics noted in the parents of homosexuals than in the parents of heterosexuals.

Mutual Influence of Parental Characteristics

Negative characteristics in either the mother or father can exert an influence on the development of sexual identity in the child. However, it is when these patterns occur together in a family that they have their most profound effect. Bieber and Bieber (1979) state that it is the constellation of a detached hostile father and a close-binding-intimate and dominating mother which is the most significant factor in the genesis of homosexuality. Bieber and Bieber (1979) have been criticized for basing their conclusions on data obtained strictly from homosexuals in psychoanalytic therapy. However, research with extremely different homosexual samples has supported the importance of the pattern delineated by Bieber and Bieber (Evans, 1969; Snortum, 1969; Thompson et al., 1973).

Evans (1969) compared the responses of homosexual men

to those of heterosexual men on a 27-item questionnaire adapted from the Bieber interview. Subjects in this study were volunteers who had never sought psychotherapy. The results of this study are similar to those of Bieber and Bieber (1979) and indicated the same negative characterisitics and poor parental relationships in the backgrounds of significantly more homosexuals than heterosexuals. Although these results agree with other research findings, Evans noted that the influence of the child's innate characteristics on parental reactions toward the child must be taken into account.

In another study of male and female homosexuals, volunteer subjects were matched with heterosexual controls (Thompson et al., 1973). Parent-child interactions were measured (using an adaptation of the Bieber questionnaire) along with sexual identity (using a semantic differential, adjective checklist, and drawing completion test). The results indicated that for both male and female homosexuals, parental relationships closely approximated the "classical" pattern. This was not the case among heterosexual controls.

Snortum (1969) also replicated this finding with homosexuals enlisted in the military. Subjects were given a self-report inventory of developmental experiences adapted from the Bieber interview. The inventory measured self-concept and perceptions of mother and father characteristics. When compared with both a military control

group and a college student control group, the inventory successfully discriminated the homosexual group at the .01 level of significance and supported the parental pattern noted by Bieber and Bieber (1979). Data from the control groups indicated that the constellation noted by Bieber & Bieber is not a pattern that is typical of families in the general population.

A study of 200 Dutch male homosexuals in treatment also supported Bieber and Bieber's (1979) findings. For this group, Van den Aardweg (1984) concluded that it is not the over-protective mother as an isolated factor that produced homosexuality, but this type of mother in combination with negative father characteristics.

Van den Aardweg (1984) further asserted that if the mother does not over-protect her son or try to inhibit masculine development, negative father effects are not so pathogenic. Likewise, if the father is interested and encouraging, negative mother characteristics are not so influential. Bieber and Bieber (1979) also noted that the presence of a loving father could neutralize the mother's homosexually inducive behavior. In Van den Aardweg's sample, the more normal the mother was, the more negative was the father.

In their study for the Kinsey Institute, Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith (1981) did not support the importance of parental factors in the causation of

homosexuality. While weak fathers and dominant mothers were identified by their sample, they concluded that "no particular phenomenon of family life can be singled out as especially consequential for either homosexual or heterosexual development" (p. 190). However, there are some possible problems with these conclusions.

Data for this study was collected by open-ended interview questions and adjective checklists, and there were few questions concerning specific parental behaviors. Their statistical analyses tested a pattern of interrelations between mother, father, and peer group variables related to gender identity. The authors stated that their analysis of the data "depends on a given theoretical model and must be interpreted with caution" (p. 22).

In their analyses, they used multiple regression to test their hypotheses, but did not test for specific interactions such as those between mother and father characteristics. Instead, they looked at the effect of each variable individually after controlling for all other variables. Further, if parental characteristics influence the development of homosexuality primarily due to their intermediate effect on gender identity, the role of parental characteristics would be missed by multiple regression. These factors may account for the differences in their

conclusions on the importance of parental characteristics in homosexual development.

Relationship of Gender Identity to Homosexuality

While the research shows that a relationship exists between negative parental characteristics and homosexuality in the child, this is not necessarily a direct etiological relationship. It appears that homosexual boys and girls behave differently in childhood than other boys and girls. Thus, the child's behavior may in part be responsible for the negative relationship between parent and child (Saghir & Robins, 1971).

However, while causality cannot be clearly pinpointed, it still remains evident that certain parental characteristics are associated with the likelihood of becoming homosexual. This effect may be due to the parents influence on the development of gender identity in the homosexual child. It may be that parental characteristics influence gender identity, which in turn influences the likelihood of developing a homosexual orientation. Therefore, it is important to consider gender identity in the development of homosexuality.

Development of Gender Identity

Gender identity is the psychological concept of being male or female in one's self-perception (Rosen & Rekers, 1980; Shively & DeCecco, 1977). Gender role is the public

expression of gender identity, manifested in behavior and attitudes (Rosen & Rekers, 1980). The development of gender identity usually takes place before age three. It is displayed in typically masculine or feminine behaviors at an early age (Money, 1975; Shively & DeCecco, 1977).

In homosexuals, a cross-over of role preferences is often evident in childhood (Money, 1975). In boys, this cross-over is expressed by such behaviors as playing with girls' toys and a preference for female playmates. They shun team sports and rough play, and are often called "sissies." In girls, there is a dislike of dolls and domestic activity, and a preference for male playmates and sports activities. Both males and females report a frequent desire to belong to the opposite sex. These patterns are not commonly reported by heterosexual males and females. They indicate a cross-over of gender role preferences in the development of the homosexual child (Saghir & Robins, 1971).

Parental Influence on Gender Identity

In one of the few studies found measuring parental factors and sexual identity in male and female homosexuals, items were identified that best distinguished the homosexuals from heterosexual controls (Thompson et al., 1973). The seven best discriminators for males, in order of significance (all at the .001 level) were: played baseball never or sometimes, played competitive group games never or sometimes, spent very little time with father, physical

makeup as a child was frail, clumsy, or coordinated (in contrast to heterosexuals' "athletic"), did not feel accepted by father or only mildly so, only sometimes played with boys before adolescence, and mother often or always insisted on being the center of child's attention.

For females, the seven best discriminators (also .001 level of significance) were: often or very often played baseball, physical makeup as a child was athletic (in contrast to heterosexuals' "coordinated"), only sometimes played with girls before adolescence, only sometimes or never avoided physical fights, did not accept father or only moderately so, did not feel accepted by mother or only moderately so, and father always or often preferred child to mother.

Thompson et al. (1973) made a further comparison of how the background patterns of these groups related to sexual identity. They concluded that the pattern for both male and female homosexuals was more similar to the "classic" parental constellation found in the background of homosexual males, than that of either heterosexual males or females. This parental pattern was also associated with sex-role nonconformity in the homosexual child.

Many other researchers have noted that homosexual preference and behavior is strongly linked to the formation of gender identity (Bell et al., 1981; Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969; Money, 1984; Poole, 1972; Rekers, Mead,

Rosen, & Brigham, 1983; Snortum, 1969; Stephans, 1973; Van den Aardweg, 1984), but few of these researchers have tested this hypothesis. However, the lack of clear gender identity and gender role in the homosexual seems to be influenced to a large degree by the parental characteristics discussed earlier in this paper.

Father's role. The role of the father is especially important in the development of sexual identity. "The single most important variable related to sex-role identification in children is paternal nurturance" (Mead & Rekers, 1979, p. 927). A review of the research in this area indicated that affectionate, nurturing and involved fathers are more likely to have masculine sons and feminine daughters (Mead & Rekers, 1979). This type of father was not characteristic of the male and female homosexuals studied.

In the case of male homosexuals, the negative father characteristics noted (discussed previously) appear to undermine the boy's masculine interests and behaviors (Rekers et al., 1983; Van den Aardweg, 1984). A consistently differentiating factor for homosexuals vs. heterosexuals was a feeling of being unlike other boys (Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Evans, 1969; Snortum, 1969; Stephan, 1973; Thompson et al., 1973; Van den Aardweg, 1984). This feeling of not belonging may be due to a sense of impaired masculinity brought about by a lack of identification with

the father or other male role models. It appears that boys are not likely to identify with their father's role if their interactions with them are not rewarding and affectionate (Mead & Rekers, 1979).

Female homosexuals also consistently noted a negative relationship with their fathers and failed to identify with the female role (discussed previously). Highly masculine fathers who encouraged feminine behavior in their daughters tended to have more feminine girls (Mead & Rekers, 1979). Lesbians' fathers were uninvolved and did not encourage participation in feminine role learning games. Thus, it appears that lesbians defined the feminine role as negative (Poole, 1972).

Mother's role. The role of the mother seems to be less of a factor in the development of sexual identity than that of the father (Mead & Rekers, 1979). However, the negative characteristics noted in mothers of homosexual males and females still exert some influence.

Mothers who are dominant and close binding with their sons failed to encourage appropriate masculine attitudes and behaviors (Rekers et al., 1983). In some cases, these mothers inhibited masculinity in their sons (Thompson et al., 1973).

For females, normal gender development was related to a warm, nurturant relationship with the mother (Mead & Rekers, 1979). The majority of homosexual females did not feel

accepted by their mothers and viewed them as lacking in affection and understanding (Poole, 1972; Thompson et al., 1973).

Overall, it appears that the father plays a more significant role than the mother in the development of gender identity in both male and female chilren. Fathers who were not warm and nurturant inhibited masculine development in sons and feminine development in daughters. Negative mother characteristics also appeared to impact the healthy development of gender identity in both males and females. This lack of an adequate figure for identification along with a lack of affirmation for appropriate sex role behavior appeared to impact the child's acceptance of the appropriate gender role and identity. This failure in gender identity formation is related to the development of homosexuality in both males and females.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings reported in this paper support the contention that parental characteristics are related to the development of a homosexual orientation in both males and females. While causality has not yet been demonstrated, the incidence of negative parental factors in the backgrounds of homosexuals as compared to heterosexuals clearly indicates that the relationship of these factors to the development of homosexuality cannot be overlooked. It seems likely that

these negative parental characteristics influence the development of homosexuality due to their impact on gender identity formation in the child. It is important to acknowledge the problems in the development of homosexual individuals so that these factors can be attended to.

While a thorough discussion of treatment is beyond the scope of this paper, the findings presented here raise important implications for the treatment of ego-dystonic homosexually-oriented individuals. The treatment of individuals expressing a homosexual orientation who desire to change may benefit from exploration of early family relationships as well as issues of gender identity formation. However, early intervention with families exhibiting disturbed parental and parent-child relationships may have the most profound effect. At this level, potentially harmful patterns could be addressed in order to circumvent their influence on the child's later development.

Interventions at this level would focus on training and encouraging healthy parental attitudes and child-rearing practices, expecially in the area of gender identity and gender role. If children are given the opportunity to develop pride in their sexual identity, many of the ego-dystonic disturbances in sexual orientation could potentially be avoidable.

It is possible that these conclusions could be interpreted as support for stereotypical sex-role

socialization. However, this is not the intention. Research on androgyny has shown the beneficial effects of promoting a more accepting attitude toward less traditional sex-role behavior and has expanded the options of acceptable behavior for both sexes. While the direction of this change is beneficial, it is important to find a balance in which the development of appropriate gender identity is encouraged without promoting overly rigid sex-roles. Research has not yet clearly distinguished the range of healthy vs. dysfunctional sex-role socialization.

Obviously, more research in this area is needed to pinpoint specific attitudes and behaviors in both the parents and child that place a child at risk for the development of gender disturbances. This would probably best be accomplished through more representative longitudinal studies that identify childhood factors of homosexuality and trace the development of these factors over a span of time. Developmental studies and studies of the parents of homosexuals are needed to increase our understanding of etiological factors in the development of homosexuality and to further our awareness of the most efficacious means of treatment for ego-dystonic homosexually-oriented individuals.

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